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Stupid Hypocrisy

As Opposed to the More Useful Kind

Chicago.

PRESIDENT REAGAN accused Nicaragua of "hypocrisy" in denouncing interference with its regime while it helps rebels in El Salvador.

He was right, of course. Most countries practice such hypocrisy. We have for years denounced terrorism while conducting it, plotting to assassinate foreign leaders, topple governments, sabotage crops and installations. We have made

By Garry Wills

and unmade governments when it suited us, as in Iran or Guatemala. And the president who spoke to us was himself restoring such covert powers to the CIA even as he talked piously.

That kind of hypocrisy comes, I am afraid, to anyone playing the game of power politics. It may be deplorable, but it is — yes, hypocritical — to pretend that Nicaragua's conduct is unique and heinous in this respect.

But there is another kind of hypocrisy, one that tries to ingratiate transparently. This is wrong simply because it is dumb. And that is the kind of hypocrisy President Reagan indulged in while telling Central American countries we are just interested in their prosperity. Only incidentally, or as a corollary, do we care whether they remain anti-communist. Here are the president's hypocritical words:

"Our goal must be to focus our immense and growing technology to enhance health care, agriculture, industry; to ensure that we who inhabit this interdependent region come to know and understand each other better, retaining our diverse identities, respecting our diverse traditions and institutions . . . We do not view security assistance as

an end in itself but as a shield for democratization, economic development and diplomacy."

Lyndon Johnson used the same language, more or less, in promising to build TVAs in the Mekong Valley, to enhance the prosperity of a country we were bombing to pieces. And now we just have the Central Americans' own good at heart? So President Reagan tells us. Yet this is the man who has been against foreign aid for merely social purposes — and why not? He is against social aid to his own poor citizens. How can he be taken seriously as worrying about the health of poor children in other countries?

This is the man who fought, in blatantly imperialistic language, to keep the Panama Canal we had "bought," who defends secret wars conducted in defiance of agreements made by the Organization of American States; who rejects the friendly offices of other governments in the region. Yet he just wants Central American nations to be strong and independent?

This is the man who appoints as a procurator for El Salvador the friend of Guatemala's past and present military rulers; who praises authoritarians so long as they are not Marxists; who gauges all his politics, foreign and domestic, by the single test of anti-communism. Does he expect gullible foreigners to think he is offering gifts out of sheer kindness?

This is the man who, in the very speech where he made his hypocritical claims, tried to alarm America into thinking our entire safety depends on propping up a crumbling government in little El Salvador. Yet he affects disinterested benevolence. This should do anything but reassure the ordinary people of Central American who are supposed to be the beneficiaries of Mr. Reagan's policies.